THE TOWER
2024–2025

The Tower

University of Montevallo
2024–2025

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Letter from the Editor

Putting *The Tower* together this year has been unlike anything I have ever experienced. Because this was my first time in a position of this much importance, I got to learn more about leadership, initiative, and hard work than I ever have in my life—only amplifying my immense admiration for each person that has done this in the past and each person that has contributed to *The Tower* across the years.

I would like to thank the entire Student Publications committee for selecting me for this role and believing in me, especially Ashley Wurzbacher without whose help and reminders I undoubtedly wouldn't have gotten anything done. I would like to thank past editors Near Hollingsworth and Blaine Richardson for their guidance in passing the torch. I would like to thank my Tower team: Easton, for putting this thing together and knowing what to do when even I did not; Dee, for not only being an amazing copy editor but also helping me put every event together (and being the best chauffeur); and Cas, for making the best posts and flyers, bearing with me in all my late-night messages and last-minute requests.

Lastly, I want to thank everyone who submitted to *The Tower* this year, and everyone who attended our events and meetings. Seeing this organization grow has been such a joy to watch. All of your beautiful art and writings have made me so proud to present this year's issue.

Okay, you can turn the page now! Dig in!

Skye Anderson
2024–2025 Editor in-Chief

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Women power

Nia Cosby

Mother

Emily Strickland

a child's mind wanders through the suffocating
brush of thorns.
so many wounds; blood is rushing to the surface.
i am searching for my mother's innocence, no
matter what i may encounter on the journey.
every nick and stab only fueling my spirit.
the connection of fates intertwined in a fearful
and tight knot.
the purity i dream of a footstep away, though it is
equivalent to a decade of hardships.
i can feel myself wearing down, i only wish to
have it so tangibly.
flora and wildlife will grow again, and i will find
peace.

The Milkmaid

Lyd

devoted and depraved

Katie Ozley

they dreamed
of loving each other
like fire loves forest
like breaking loves bones
all-consuming and ruinous

they danced
barely touching bodies
like moths and light
like glass and ground
chaotic and punishing

they desired
rough hands on skin
like thorns on cloth
like rot on fruit
parasitic and carnal

they delighted
in the heat of taking
like knives in spines
like poison on tongues
thrilling and vicious

they descended
never to return
like stones in waves
like canaries in mines
wasteful and cruel

they devoured
eating each other's hearts
like teeth and tendons
like maggots and corpse
hungry and ravaging

they decayed
gaping flesh turning to dirt
like forests turn to ash
like bones turn to shards
consumed and ruined

Homeward Bound
Easton Starnes

Ethereal: Enby Incarnate
Easton Starnes

Captivating
Romeo Garrison

The muses speak to me.
I have magic flowing from my fingertips.

I feel the lord's voice in my throat,
fluttering like a wounded bird.
I bathe in the lake yet I emerge not baptized,
still shrouded in sin.

Gold are the words in my head,
coming from unknown speakers.
They speak to me,
bring me good tithes of inspiration.

The muses speak to me.
And I heed their callings.

The Prophet

Bo Ferguson

three beers two tylenol

Isabelle Garrett

big sandwich with pickle

Isabelle Garrett

That Might Be Just What I Needed

Andrew Wilson

My mother died during my transition from high school to college, and left me $200,000 in assets that were promptly liquidated by the executor of her will and handed to me. My aged grandfather's weird, crinkly hand laid on me as I looked upon the casket, and consoled me, saying that it is a hard thing to go through so many important events in life so quickly. Usually you want to space out your tragedies, so my mother should have probably lived at least until March so I could use Spring Break to recover. However, with this level of liquid capital one must utilize it, or risk losing. To transfer financial capital to social capital is an extraordinarily hard thing to do. I nodded. Something along those lines might be just what I needed. Then, I felt what Newton probably felt like two or three times: an eruption, a true idea, great movements of data and brilliance into a new shining paradigm to base one's life upon.

It was the first day of college. My roommate was obviously a little nervous. I had already moved in, to gain the advantage. I needed the left dresser as well, I felt that was important. He waved his hand at me, small effeminate looking guy, toting a small bag. I believe his mother was in her car with the rest of her stuff. I nodded at him.

"So, what do you like to do?" he said.

"Oh, I dunno, play video games."

"Oh, me too!"

This was obviously a sign of fraternization. I did the cue for the three man band I had hired with my mother's large financial gift upon her death in a gruesome car accident. The band was composed of a guy with sunglasses who sang, a drummer, and a bassist.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

You know, the chorus to that one song? Made by Macrosse or some other band. The Macross? I smiled greatly.

My roommate shrinked.

"Wh-who are these people?"

"What?"

"The band."

"I don't understand what you are referring to."

The little man crinkled up like a raisin. He walked out without saying another word and I never saw him again. The RA came into my room several days later, saying that I get to have a single room for the double room price. Just a law of numbers, or something.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

The RA blinked a little at the sudden interlude and retreated as well.

You know how they play music in movies? And then they started playing music in grocery stores? This is kind of developing off of that; an accent to my declarations. To add a narrative, fate type quality to my interactions. However, this development seemed to not cover up a fault beginning to rise within myself, that I was abjectly and completely repulsive. Whenever I spoke to people and we seemed to make a sort of connection, they began to ask strange questions or say nothing, and eventually retreat. Soon people were eyeing me with great suspicion. Perhaps they knew my mother was dead and thought I was weird, but I could not really change that. I got a new haircut.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

In French class, Mr. Rocheambeux was an adjunct faculty member who taught at this college, and the college a few counties over, on a rotating five day schedule, amounting to around eight classes per semester. His eyes were pressed in, and he swore his girlfriend was cheating on him, since in their

once a month date time she seemed more and more distant. She stopped texting him good morning like she used to, and her smile seemed a little pressed in whenever he saw her, like she was hiding something—like she was obliged a little to smile, cardboard corners folding in, slowly decaying. During a test I looked over at the guy next to me. He was pretty smart. Copied the answer, bubbled it in.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

Mr. Rocheambeux went red and came up to me, and marched me right outside the classroom.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"You three, if you want to be in the class, need to register. I thought you guys were just auditing, but if you want to continue to come and then INTERRUPT the test, then you need to at least pay tuition."

The band members stood stoically silent.

"Oh, that's okay. I'll deal with it."

Mr. Rocheambeux stared a hole in the back of my head when I walked away. Judging from this interaction and the previous week of attending all of his office hours and trying to really make a connection, I think this new haircut is not really working. I decided to start wearing brighter colors, and incorporate more slang and trendy language within my lexicon.

One day I was walking out late at night, and encountered a woman drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes on an obscure bench in the park. I approached.

"Howdy do?"

"What?"

"You slinging hash?"

"What?"

"Yo. Cheerio!"

"Are you serious right now?"

I stopped to consider. "Yeah. I am fire."

She doubled over laughing, and I think cried a little bit.

"A guy with bright yellow facepaint, and a hi-vis vest, and several flashlights strapped to him. These cigarettes are laced with something..."

"My presence is not a consequence of the drugs you have consumed."

"Yeah, that's what they all say."

"So, do you like my outfit? And my personality?"

"Sure, man."

I smiled.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

"AH! AH!"

For some reason she was quite surprised when my band members surrounded her. She ran off. Always, just when things are turning well for me, they get snatched out of my hand. I decided to go for a darker look, to reflect my inner self. People like that crap.

I laid my head on my pillow. The three members of the band loomed over me. Every night I put some money and instructions in an envelope. Their fees were gloriously low. The singer wore sunglasses, so I never saw his eyes, his face. The three never seemed to show any emotion. That's what they were: accessories, background information. A seasoning to the dish of my life. Sadly, seasoning a really bad hot dog just makes a slightly less worse hotdog. I instructed them in the envelopes recently to look over me in my sleep and help me in my dreams. That might improve my subconscious. They could play different songs, or more than just the chorus, but I never told them. The abbreviated version is the only one worth doing, it distilled all the data into a very bite-sized, digestible form.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

Registering the three members for college led to some interesting roadblocks. The drummer had failed community college and did not have a good enough transfer GPA to

register for French class. We all climbed into my car and went to Clayton County to talk to the dean, lay prostrate for her to allow this transfer to happen. I turned off the flashlights to make myself darker. During the drive, due to perhaps subliminal messaging, I stopped at four different gas stations and spent $17 on various types of local pork rinds, county and regional brands. I passed them back to the bassist, and did not hear the bag open or the rinds being eaten, but there were plenty of crumbs when I looked back to check later.

The dean denied our request, despite pleading and prodding and much ashes and sackcloth. Said sackcloth was used to tie up her young child, darker clothing was donned, and threats of "throwing this like a gerbil in a sock onto a kitchen counter" led to a speedy approval letter. I finally could go back to French, but the several days spent travelling and the long dispute over a speeding ticket meant I missed a few assignments and was failing in all of my classes, making Algebra not even passable. I thought I would change my haircut again to get a fresh start.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

I began to loathe myself. This failure, why was it so? I needed to feel pain to atone. I instructed the band to begin playing at random intervals, to shock me with the chorus. I felt all the eyes around me and my pompadour-mullet, trenchcoat, and shoe-shine enhanced skin. The sudden and random addition of seasoning strangely led to a twitch in my eye that would not stop. I began to wake at random hours of the night. I tipped the band a little more each day. They never spoke, we never even really acknowledged each other's existence, but they were my only friends, as long as I kept putting money into the envelope. I think the band's name isn't The Macross, it's The Scooter.

The dean of my college had a special meeting with me. Finals were coming up, and my grades were looking quite bad. I might not be able to come back to school, I only got a C in History, and this dean did not have any children. I pleaded for some mercy.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

The dean sighed and said to do my best on my finals, and we could see what to do after that. She probably did not like my trenchcoat and trilby hat, which I would burn at the next possible chance. Perhaps it was my nose? My cheeks? Some fundamental flaw within myself that was causing the problem. The plastic surgeon readily agreed with everything I said and gave the bassist a bag of pork rinds. I was going to get a lot of work done.

I was late to my French final due to the work on my forehead. It needed to be more slanted I thought. Mr. Rocheambeux walked out, the air of a man completely defeated by life circumstances, looked at me, and then smiled warmly, laughed even.

"At least I'm not you, Mike. I'll give you a 100. The only thing keeping me going is the fact that I am not on the bottom, that I'm not you. That's worth a 100. That's worth a 100..."

I did get a B in French, but I forgot I signed up for Online Business 101 and had to spend a few minutes doing my connect the dots final, which ended with me getting an A in the class. Things were looking good for me. Sadly, in Algebra, my tactic did not work…

"A.....B.....C....."

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

"A...."

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

"A.....B.....C.....D.....F....."

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

The math professor threatened expulsion. I did not know why. The dean had no sympathy in her eyes. I went outside to the student union and wept, in my ripped skinny jeans and classic chemise, my happy-new-year-2020 glasses with eye holes in the zeros, my assortment of pins of Romanian Iron Guard leaders and war heroes. This was a real low, and unlike the movies, I didn't think there was a rebound.

A girl approached me while I was weeping.

"Are you okay?"

I looked up at her hopefully.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

"No, I'm not really doing okay."

"You want to talk about it?"

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

"No."

"Oh."

"You don't love me."

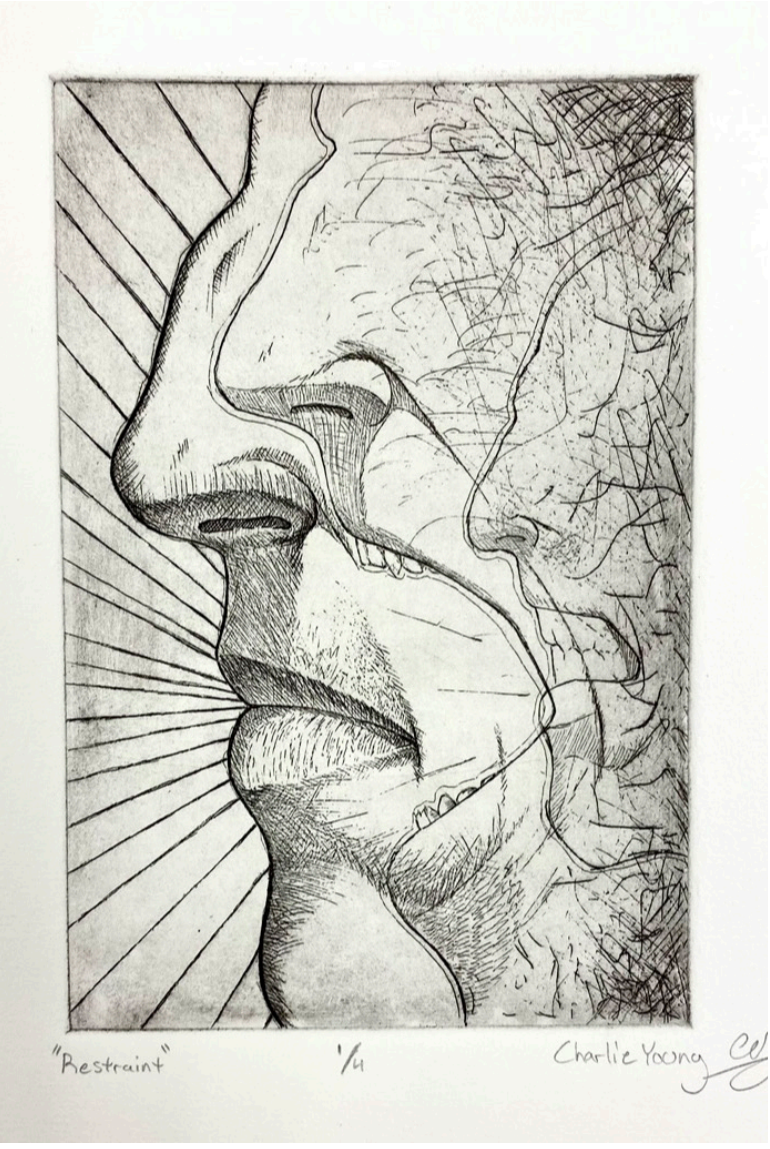
"I mean, yeah?"

"You don't LOVE me. You don't LOVE me. You don't LOVE me."

The dean chastised me. Chasing one of our best students around the main quad, yelling, noise complaints from RAs, your grades are decent but maybe we need to set up some counseling services with you. Oh god, oh god. The year was ending and the money was running out. I couldn't pay the band anymore.

« *THAT MIGHT BE JUST WHAT I NEEDED* »

I was in darkness, staring into oblivion. There was no way to recover from this, and nobody could save me.



Restraint
Charlie Young

Princess Cicada's Sleepytime Bedroom

Romeo Garrison

Fluid comfort, golden home,
I pour you through my body,
Warming my appendages,
A fullling faithful hobby.

Salty, savory chicken broth,
I treasure every moment.
Ritualize the tendency,
Never to withhold it.

One good year of noodle soup,
One full year, consistent.
Eaten every second,
Beloved every instant.

One Good Year of Soup
Chelsia Crist

Shooting Stars
Kailyn Opperud

Flu Season

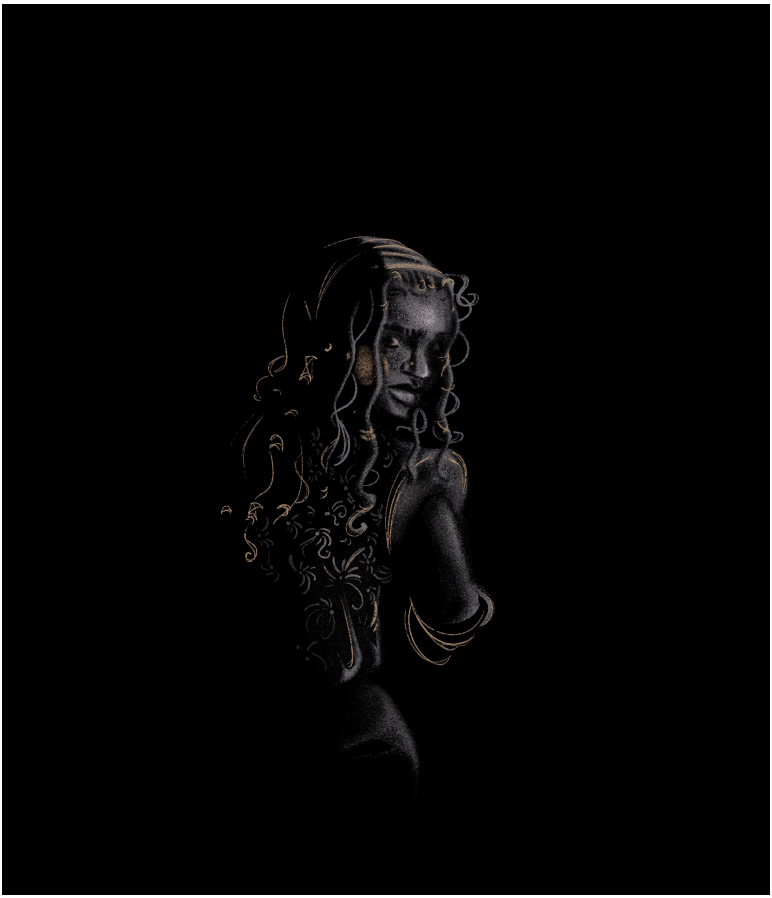
Romeo Garrison

A cool, damp blanket settles over the cobble
Thick like sponge cake
Cemetery-quiet in a hush
Frozen mist, bittersweet
On my tongue and susceptible skin
Shuddering like an implosion
Without someone to shield me from the chill

A dark, sick month
Where the moon never rose
And the sun never shone
Your eyelash never kissed my cheek
Ghost-town dawn
With just the hollow fog to hold me

The left side of an under-made bed
The passenger seat
The palm of my hand
10 steps from door to door
(I keep looking over my shoulder)
Empty places you belong
Sharing orange slices with Orpheus
Tasting your impression in the pillows

Sunlight, lemonade, strawberry cake
Sweet understanding and warm skin
All a whisper in the grey morning air
With an empty hand



Elusion
A. K. T. Carter

A Small Midnight Reminder

Alex Williams

I felt you last night
through the sheets and comforter
And the quilt on top for good measure

You were curled up into yourself
arms tucked behind your knees
to pull your legs ever closer

I was lying on my back
with my head turned to the left
in an effort to keep my earbud in

You sounded like you were dreaming
mumbling something incoherent
But I heard one thing clearly:

"You're delusional," you said
and what could I say to that?
Nothing, that's what

And then you went quiet for a while
and you drew your legs even closer
as you started biting through your lip

When you left, you kissed me
and I tasted metal for a moment
until you sank back into the mattress

And tears started pooling on my pillow
as I wondered if you'd ever come back
to see me, and if you'd really be there

But I knew you wouldn't
at least not that night
The batteries had died.

Eastern Bluebird
Charlie Young

Hummingbird Prayers

Bo Ferguson

A response to Mary Oliver's "Whistling Swans"

When I find that moment of solitude to pray,
I close my eyes tight like a scared child.
And if prayers come from all directions,
then how do I know you hear me?
While the swans may be ruckus, and he listens,
my words are like hummingbirds; flitting and zipping around;
        Can you catch them?
Yet I agree, there *is* proof of the soul,
as I look around I see Him.
Even when He is silent, He speaks in creation;
and that in itself is where it is shown.
There are a thousand voices, a cacophony of sound,
and so why need one more?
        when you can just look around?

Seasonal Animals
Brooke Mills

Fishing With Grandad

Brooke Mills

oil and acid

Dee Smith

it has come our attention
that the other produce in the fridge
have noticed your seeds and flesh.
a wedge has been cut
from the plump edge of your rump
and sour juice has begun to drip
onto carrots in the crisper.
please see to this issue and report back
at your earliest convenience.

I apologize for my insides out.
due to unforeseen circumstances,
I have become unwhole
and require some support
in my quest for consumption.
if I could have some oil and acid
to smooth the swallow of me
down a throat,
I will be gone and no longer oozing.
thank you.

if there were oil and acid
in which I could smother
every tomato, daikon, or hass
to wander in and out of these cool shelves,
the owner of a throat
could open the door and slip
on all the slick dripping from the cracks.
we have no offerings for you at this time.
please see to your issue and report back.
thank you.

I am bleeding.
a sliver of me— and only a sliver—
has been sliced and eaten
and there is too much of me left
to do with.
oil and acid will deliver me from this agony
and you from annoyance;
then, we can go back
to crisp and quiet.

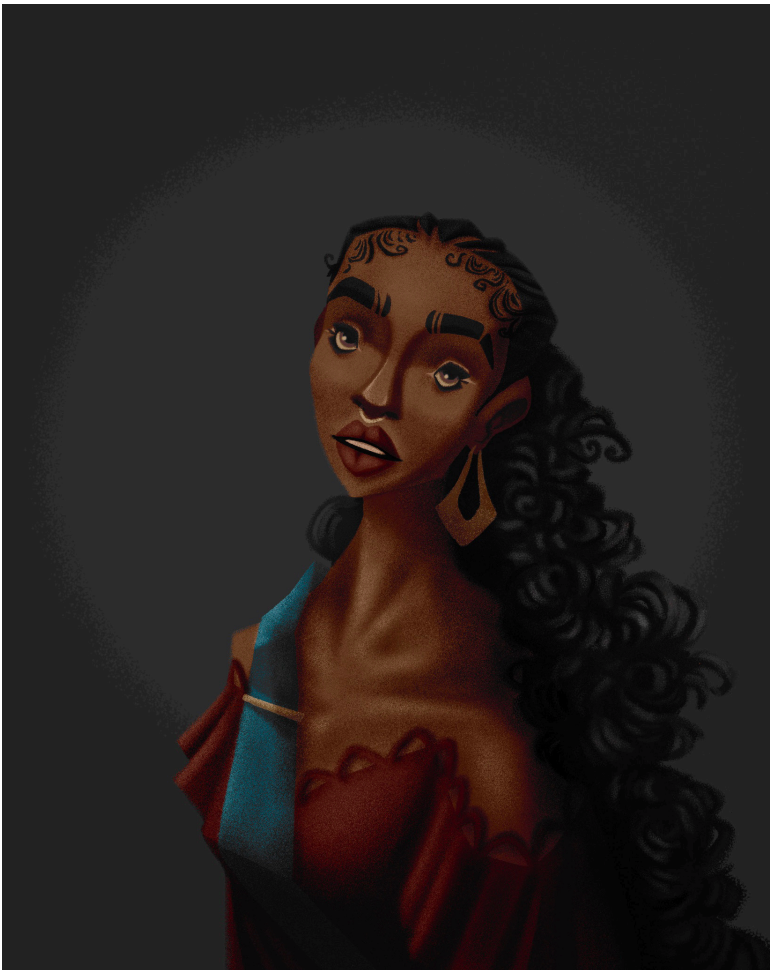
oil and acid is in the pantry.
if you so desired, your time
could be spent tepid and dry.
perhaps some desperate throat
could have consumed you by now
had you graced that path,
but you did not,
and you remain undigested.
blame your ignorance, your own folly;
you are pithless to blame
the rest of us for the undesirable nature
of your own bitter, blushing inner jelly.
please see to your issue.

please respond.

respond. you have come apart.
we are covered in your failure.

respond.

Spirit Captain
A. K. T. Carter



The Princess
A. K. T. Carter

Wrath
Isabelle Mitchell

Selma's Echo

Easton Starnes

Starfall

Cas Potter

Stars fall between the breaks in the trees.

It's a superstition. The sort of myth that passes through mouths, words softened with the curl of a different lip with each new reiteration. The details may change, warped in their passage from community to community, but the core of it lingers, ever present and ever stubborn as the burn of the sun in the sky:

Stars fall between the breaks in the trees.

The ground there is blackened by the heat and scrapes roughly underfoot, far less kind than the wilting grass that surrounds it. Everyone who passes over it murmurs a hushed prayer, urging children along over tripping feet so as to not linger longer than welcome. The earth there doesn't belong to them. The earth there is volatile, it shakes and trembles while the rest of the woods stand still, a shrieking siren of warning for what lies ahead.

Some refer to it as a mercy. How kind the stars must be to offer a warning when they could descend with nary a sound instead of the deafening heavenly song that announces their swift arrival.

Some do not refer to it at all. Too frightened to dare, they quiver in fear at the very mention. "Uncontrolled," they bellow, the whites of their eyes haunting with glittering stars. "Unleashed." The howl is a mindless thing, they say, they care not for the very concept of mercy or conquest.

Insentient or benevolent. The endless options fit poorly in such small boxes. The song of a sun-caught angel or the roar of a thoughtless, tumbling beast.

Or, there's another choice, though it's one I care little to think about. The thought that the sound is no act of kindness, no mindless jabbering, but something sterile. Something cold.

A dinner bell.

See, those who cross the starpath rarely return home

to speak of the tale. Those who do were rendered half-blind, skin torn and shredded by their scalding glow, bones creaking underneath the trembling strain of their own bodies. They rarely last long, the unlucky few. It's crueler to watch them waste, blabbering eternally of the stars or monsters or nothing, nothing at all, than to find what remains of them, clinging to the edges of the treeline.

It's tinted, I'm certain, by my own biases. The few that refuted me let the words trickle to a stop after my mother stumbled free of the path, quivering on shattered legs like a newly christened fawn. Blood had trailed down the great slope of her forehead like a winding river, shining like the stars, and all I had been able to think of had been the mountains. The ones in her many rambling stories, blanketed with snow in the cold months and floods of pure water in the warmer. I clung to her as if drowning.

The sight of the stars will guide my way to the surface. I grow tired of the breathless ache in my lungs.

Stars fall between the breaks in the trees. The mystery of it all lies mostly untouched, unmarred by anything aside from the dark depths of the night sky and the trails of ash they leave behind them. Here, tonight, under a blanket of night and the soft twinkle of the shining angels above, I move through the trees, scattered dried leaves crunching underfoot.

Here, tonight, I linger at the very edges of wilted grass, half-dead, dying. My mother told me of the stars' gentle hands, choking honeyed words through her wet red gasps, but I find it difficult to believe now. How could something so kind do this? Life leeches from the forest, the green of the trees fade into a dull yellow into graying gravel into black, dark enough to rival the sky above. How could something so kind take from us so carelessly? Saint and sinner, they burn all the same.

Mother and stranger, they burn all the same.

The thrum of my own heartbeat hums in wretched harmony with the faint beginnings of the chorus. If only the forest was not so quiet tonight. If only it was not so achingly silent, the very birds hushed, as if mourning me before my

life ever ended. “I’m still here,” I imagine shrieking, shrill enough to rattle the crossing branches that clung to my sides, desperate, trying to pull me back into their embrace. “I’m still here, they haven’t taken me yet!”

What do they know that I do not?

Is it the stars’ siren song that draws them away? That drew so many of us into the stars’ burning path? How sweetly they must croon. How tempting their light must be. I don’t know. I’m still young. Lost without the guiding hand of my mother. I shrink back, as if I could still hide beneath her comforting shadow, as if I could close my ears to the growing roar of a star’s descent.

Nothing could stop them. How could it? How could a mere soul be little more than a fleeting obstacle in the path of a heavenly light. I could not stop it, no matter how I wished, how I prayed with the soft, murmuring wishes of a child far younger than I. All I had ever been able to do was watch, a still and silent spectator to the aftermath of their hunger, their mercy, their careless negligence.

All I am able to do is watch.

I am a bystander even in my own trembling movements, sure and shaking as I step onto the starpath, as I cross the line of no return, as its color flecks under my steadfast steps. It is there I stay, it is there my eyes rise heavenward as the noise grows, more than I am able to withstand–

Before the light. A star descends. Oh, it descends with all the grace of an avalanche, the earth heaves, branches clatter, an overwhelming, shrieking cacophony of sound. The light grows, it grows until it is blinding, until darkness tears at the corners of my vision and it is all I can see. It devours. I am nothing. They are depthless and shining and swallow me whole.

Like my mother’s eyes.

The twinkle in them as they squint in her laughter, as she nudged into my side, as her stories winded on with all the strength of a lazing river. Her warmth was like nothing I have ever felt before and nothing I will ever feel again, the stars

dimmed as she did and left me behind, here, left me cold.

But here she was. Here she could be. Her memory caught in the very stars that took her. She's here.

Behind them, illuminated, lies something else. Something new, never described by those who watched the stars barrel past from the safety of the trees–I see beyond the light and, for a moment, nearly recognize what lies there.

How strange. How could such a beautiful thing feel fear?

The light bursts. And fades. Everything fades with it, touch and scent, only winces as hooves scrape across asphalt, only warm hands and a trembling voice thick with tears. The words of a mother, whispering, *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to. I never meant to hurt you. I'm sorry. Don't go.*

And the fawn, a motherless child, white spots stained in the winding river of red–the sort that trailed down the mountains in its mother's stories–stares up, not into the sky but into the weeping face of her mother. And for a moment, her glistening eyes look like the stars.

CROWN
Isabelle Mitchell

Glow
Isabelle Mitchell

Body, Traitor

Katie Ozley

I blend into the paint on the wall.
The doctor looks right through me.
"Take your clothes off,"
He says, uninterested.
"Yes, even your bra.
Even your underwear.
No, your mother isn't allowed."

I am only fourteen,
And the unforgiving steel table
Presses hard into my naked skin.
The smallest cloth covers my vagina.
I pretend I am brave.

The room is silent.
Cold, clinical hands,
Male doctor hands,
Touch my inner hip.
I flinch.

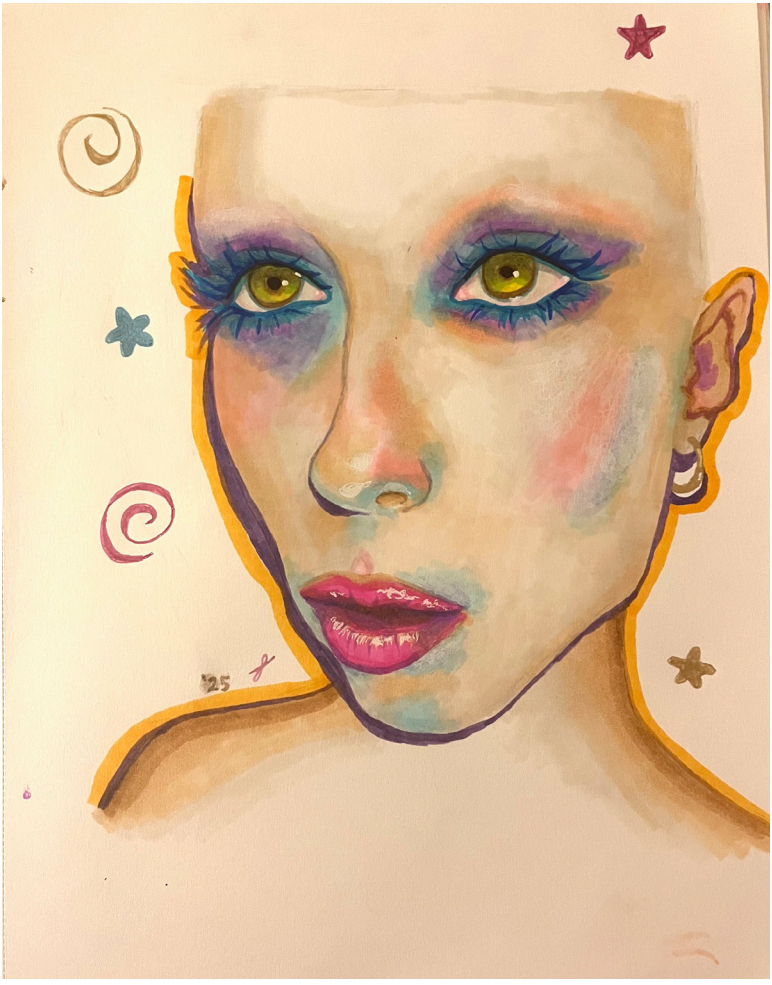
I try to stare at the ceiling,
But I can't help myself.
I watch his needle intrude
Into my body,
Long enough to numb and dye
The inside of my hip joint,
The ligaments and cartilage.
The needle pinches and burns.
I see the cloud of medicine invading me
Through the ultrasound screen,
And I can't feel my legs.

Half of my body is gone,
And pain,
Phantom, real, can't tell,
Is all I am.
My nails leave scars on my palms,
I bite my tongue until I bleed,
But I don't make a sound.

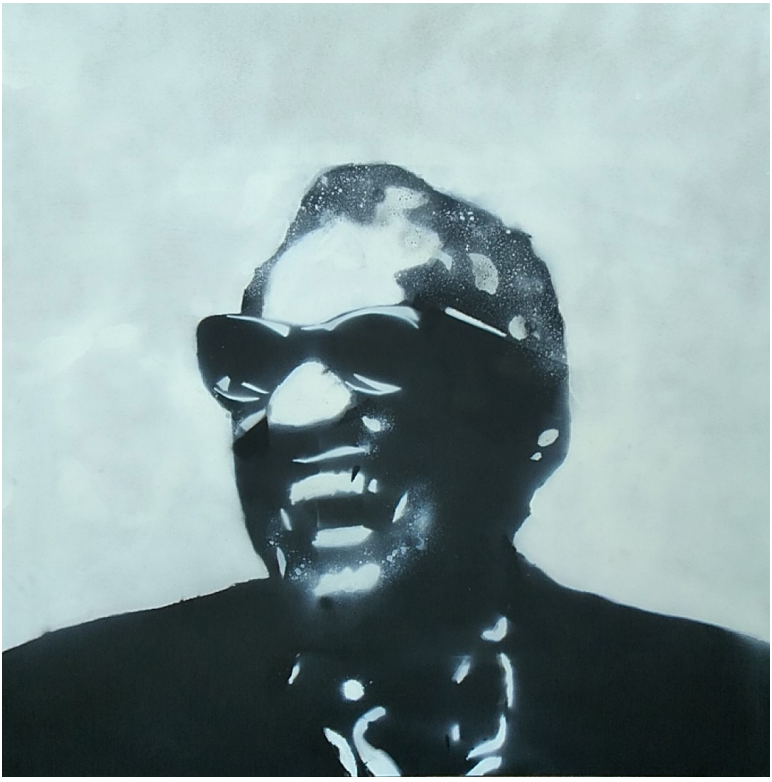
This will be worth it,
I think,
As my wrung-out body is moved
Into the deafening, claustrophobic tube.
This will all be worth it.
They will find what is wrong.
They will fix me.

Six years later,
I have blended into
So many different paint colors,
And I'm not scared anymore,
Just tired.

I live a half-life,
Mourning what I could have been.
I used to dance.
Now, I depend on the elevator,
Stuck in a body
That can't handle the stairs.



Spiral
Lyd



Ray
Nathan McKinney

Steak Tartare on Bounty Napkins

Dee Smith

Slowly,
blooming like so many wavy-edged begonia petals
growing in misshapen spirals on a time lapse
playing in two-time speed.
Soaking thoroughly,
transforming what was once opaque
into a thin pink veneer
that gradually revealed the spongy surface
of a cheap, black foldout table
from the local dollar store.

There was no trash can in the kitchen,
only bags hung on door knobs
full of caviar tins and foie gras grease.
No sheets on the brand new mattress,
just one ten-thousand count blanket
and a tasseled throw pillow.
In my mind,
dotted lines traced the spaces
in the living room where a couch might be,
or might've been—
under the window, across from the blank wall
against which a 70" television sat propped up,
waiting for the day someone forgot its place
and put their foot through its soft screen.

And still,
the weeping mess barely contained before me—
as fanciful and worthy of feast
as any fare from a can for a cat.
I had as much interest in the damp puck
as I did the rest of the apartment.

It was not a home,
hardly an abode,
and the man who had woven it—
hastily fashioned it—
did not seem overly concerned with its shortcomings.

He had not changed
in my entire life.
If I could pack all of the messy bits
of my childhood and upbringing
into a circular mold
and press it into a shape that he could eat,
he would do so without thinking,
and throw away the plastic takeout box
I would serve it in
(to suit his fine tastes).

I wondered if he would ever buy a trash can.
Or sheets.
Or a stand for his television.

I wondered if he would ever stop starting over
in half-done apartments,
and stop asking me to help him move his things.
I wondered if he would ever serve me a meal
on a plate made of ceramic.

Reflections from a Son

Bo Ferguson

The son my father always wanted
never lived within me.
Laying in my bed,
I dream of what he would be:
Strong, Calloused, Steeled.
My mother longed for more kids—
but doesn't she know?
There are two inside me.

The son, the daughter, at constant war.
Reflecting like a mirror,
always whatever the other wanted me to be.
I could act like that son,
Play pretend, well and taught.
The herald of my fathers' pride.
Yet I yearn for other possibilities,
to be both that son, that daughter.

The son my mother had,
but never quite wanted.
I play that part for her too, the daughter;
since my sister doesn't play her part.
Double-cast as both others,
acting between the two, I bow.
A wondrous portrayal of both,
taking on whatever I must.

Smell the Flowers
Kailyn Opperud

Love Your Hair, Little Black Girl

Mikiyah Douglas

Barrettes, beads, clips, and silly hair ties
So much nostalgia packed in these little accessories
All resided in that little box in your closet
Each one coordinated with every outfit

But you are getting older now
So you must trade in your lovely coils
For chemically infused silky hair
Just so the real world can take you seriously

Be sure not to scratch your head
So the chemicals can do their job
Even though every cool feeling
Comes with your spirit burning away

Your new hair feels long and luscious
Your family members comment on the
length and how beautiful it is
No longer "nappy" or "unkept"

But something was missing
Was it creativity?
Versatility?
Confidence?

All the things that you could not have
While the chemicals took over your hair
Seeing other girls embrace something
That you had once before

Even if your family members
went through the same fate
You have to want better for yourself
Better for your scalp

Take your liberty back
Do away with the lifeless hair
Trade it for braids, afros, and locs
Make it into as many colors as you want

Make them proud
The baby girl born with the cutest coils
The little girl with the braids and noisy beads
And the flat-haired teenager who longed for the day
She got to embrace her curls

Apotheosis

Romeo Garrison

Overthinking

Charlie Young

To Dwell With You

Charlie Young

My Lord,
To dwell with You is a finer place
Than all I could think or care.
For not one of my countless sins
Is too much for You to bear.
Solely good have You been,
Gentle and lowly is Thy attitude.
Your strength never wears thin
By the weight of my sin,
Thy grace is my fortitude.

My Lord,
To dwell with You is a finer place
Than to seek after signs,
To sit at Thy feet rather than
To experiences, chase and pine.
Provision is assuring,
And deliverance, even surer.
Yet what greater blessing
Could cause this fool to sing
Than to dwell with the Miracle-worker?

My Lord,
To dwell with You is a finer place
Than to legalize the cure.
Peace could never be found
If you weren't blessedly assured.
Experience cannot define,
Only Thy grace alone.
And what greater definition
Than to dwell with my King,
My Lord, three in one.

My Lord,
To dwell with You is a finer place
Than to snack on worldly bread.
It can only mimic the supreme taste
Of being risen from the dead.
Your palace has many a room
For those saved from evil's chord.
Why would I choose
A crummy hotel room
Over dwelling with You, my Lord?

baby acolyte
(i grew up in the church)
Isabelle Garrett

Boys Night Out

Scyrus Bolton

A Pulse Named Desire

Izzie Huff

Coal eyes that ignited
upon contact with my own
crumbling walls
coup de foudre

A pallor that glowed
under the bar's warm ambience
She regarded my neck
as I fiddled with my collar

Soft scarlet lips
etched in my mind
thirsted for more

An act of God, or the devil,
we met again
on a bleak hibernal night

The clouds poured forth their wrath
as I approached her web
soaked to the bone
stirred to the core

Her realm entered,
a sweet aroma
engulfed my senses

Laboring to breathe
Fumbling buttons
Kicking off shoes when

Eyes darted toward a mirror
Lead flooded my stomach
Reflection winked back
at me alone

Heart swelled like a balloon
Blood plunged to subzero
A light chuckle followed by
teeth on throat

Origins of Light
Brooke Mills

Burning through cash

Nora

Warren G. Harding and His Compromising Position

Noah Love

Once upon a time, in a worn-down city facing away from the open-skied pond, in a hole-in-the-wall building next to a horse-shoe establishment and a glue factory with a matchbox-sized apartment lived a couple that is not important to the story. They would soon welcome a child who is slightly more relevant: Little Warren, or Baby Gamaliel.

Fifty-four years later, Warren decided to run for President, and since this type of home was not a home for a notable politician's family to be living in, they decided to move to a rural two-story house with its own backyard ranch. The family that reluctantly moved in after them were the Stanmores: Joshua (father), Eliza (mother), and Cal (their only son). While being given the tour of their soon-to-be miniature home, the landlord was not shy to tell them about the politician who used to live there. This made the thirteen-year-old son unintelligibly curious.

"Dad, will you vote for President Harding?" Cal asked his father at the dinner table, well after their move-in. The food was meatloaf without the tomato paste. "No, son—first of all, he's not even president yet—and, also, we are hard blooded Democrats. I'm voting for whomever is running for that side, whatever his name is."

"What about mom?"

"What *about* your mother?"

"Could she vote for Harding while you vote for whomever is running as the Democrat's nominee, whatever his name is?"

"What a ridiculous idea. Sure, Cal. Why not."

To Joshua Stanmore's surprise, women, in fact, were given the right to vote, making Warren G. Harding the first president-elect after such a right was passed, and Cal's parents fulfilled his wishes when going out to the polls. Ever since

then, Cal Stanmore had observed and studied every action made by the then-President. He framed every newspaper that he'd ever received about Harding: his Inauguration Day, his first bill being passed, and what he had caught on a fishing trip with his friend, Frank Scobey. His father had not appreciated him liking an official so opposed to his personal political beliefs, but didn't believe it to be right to discourage his son's passion, especially since it had been so long since he had seen Cal behave like this.

Originally, Cal had been passionate about the newspaper industry and possibly journalism, something that had resonated due to his uncle, Ronald, being so active in the field. Ron had been a great influence on Cal until he turned away from the company he had been working for when they had been outed for mistreating their newspaper boys. Ron decided to start up his own business. After only a year, the plan had failed, and Ron was in massive debt. A year later, he was enlisted into the Great War and died overseas. Cal hadn't talked about Ron or journalism ever since the night he found out about his uncle's death.

Joshua Stanmore reflected upon this when staring at the framed newspapers on his son's walls before pushing past and walking along.

Cal had never been very popular—or bright—in school, only hanging around a few kids: among them Raymond Alvie, a son of a preacher who had been vocal on anti-Harding principles. Despite the difference, they were close.

After a very active day where Harding had passed an act allowing him to adjust tariff rates if needed, Cal arrived back home from school. At this time, he was normally alone since his father was at work and his mother had been doing local services around the neighborhood. Before entering his

small apartment, Cal noticed a letter in the crack below his locked front door. After grabbing and inspecting it, Cal took it inside and opened the envelope. He opened the paper and retrieved another piece from the inside, unfolding it to read the contents.

Dear Nan,

How hard it is to miss your touch
Your hardest of hands is the softest of skin
How I want to imagine it rough
You satisfy even the humblest of men—

"Oh, good lord," Cal breathed. "What is this?"

He was shocked and dazzled as to why this writing had been sent to his house. Cal questioned whether it was from a lover to either of his parents and began to sweat, worrying if he had discovered a secret relationship that could end a more important one, until reading the signature labeled at the bottom of the paper: Warren G. Harding.

"No," he said, amazed at the mark. "No, no, no, no." He continued to repeat himself before getting a better grasp on the situation. "My president sent his love letter to his old address."

The next day, Cal revealed this to Raymond Alvie at school, keeping the letter in his carrying pouch.

"How did it even get there?" Raymond asked.

"I couldn't sleep last night because of this. The only reason I can think of is that it mistakenly got mailed to his old address."

"But why *his* old address, not *hers*?"

Cal shrugged. "Must be some real mistake."

"You can say that again."

"I just don't know what to do with it."

"*I* know."

"What?"

"Pawn it."

"What it?"

"Not necessarily pawn it, but monetize it so that

people have to pay to read it." "What people?"

"Look around, jerk-off! These idiot kids around here would love to giggle at the President of the United States writing a campy love poem to his mistress."

"But…I don't want to do that."

"What? Come on, it'll be easy money and barely any work."

"But he's the president and… I like him. It's wrong. I was hoping to just be able to give it to someone and they would tell him about me and that he would—"

"—come and greet you, descending from heaven on angelic wings with holy music playing in the background just to say that you did swell not making fun of him for his humiliating love letters? Seems plausible."

"We're not making fun of him."

"No, better, we're making money while making fun of him."

"But—"

"Cal, come on, this could be big for you."

"—how can you even… *do* something like that?"

In the middle of the conversation, Raymond had already made plans about the dealing. On bathroom breaks and lunch breaks, kids would communicate with Raymond through the stalls—and with the females if they said they needed homework advice from him. The teachers believed it to be legitimate. As for payment, the students had to pay a nickel to read it and had to pay some extra if they needed an interpreter because some of them didn't understand the undertones very well. It had to be quick, but the letter was slipped underneath lunch trays to be read. Luckily the material never got damaged. Within a day, the boys collected over six dollars (nearly a hundred dollars after being adjusted for inflation to 2024 metrics).

Despite the profitable day, Cal was noticeably depressed and quiet while at home. His mother, Eliza, noticed this as he picked at his dinner.

"Cal, how was school?"

He sighed and motioned something like, "I don't know."

"Do you feel alright?"

He nodded but nothing more.

Eliza looked at Joshua, wanting him to communicate with Cal, or at least attempt to get something out of him, but he didn't, uncertain on how to approach him. The rest of the dinner had been motionless and lifeless.

The next day was even more successful—from a business standpoint, that was. Raymond, at that point, was mostly doing everything: the negotiating, the trading, and the profiting; and it wouldn't have phased Cal if he had asked for more of a cut in the profits, but he didn't.

Similar to the previous night, Cal had been inactive at school, quietly listening and moderately participating.

On the walk home back from school, surrounded by nothing more than the occasional passerby and some pigeons, two professional-looking men had approached Cal while his head held low.

"Son," the man to his left began, "I believe you have something that we want." This man was straight and frosty, with slick skin underneath layers of clothing that were noticeably drab but anything but cheap. His thin and pencil-like lips seemed particularly noticeable to Cal.

"We know what you have, boy," the man on the right stated. He was quite similar to his partner, but older, with sandier hair, more worn skin, and more layers of clothing.

"I…" Cal muttered, "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Son," the first man—the one on the left—insisted. "It would be wise if you returned the president's property."

Cal knew it was futile to insist upon playing this game of lies, like he had the ability to fool government officials. He reached inside his pouch and handed the two the now-worn slip. Giving it to them was almost like a relief.

"I…" Cal started once more right as the other two were prepared to walk off. "I never meant to do anything… wrong. I wanted whatever was best for the president but…"

"But instead, you did what you did," the second man said. "Nothing useful about what the intentions were, it's about what you did. Think about that as you grow up, kid.

Don't let it get to you too much; people like you do stupid shit like this all the time, but instead, you had to do it on a federal scale. Not many could say that, I suppose."

After that, the two men left, leaving little Cal alone on the sidewalk, wondering whether he should continue walking home or not. To him, it seemed inappropriate. He wondered what else he could do.

While walking past his room, Joshua noticed Cal sitting on his bed, looking low, noticeably sulking like the day before. He hesitated about whether or not he wanted to commit to the scenario. Listening to his fatherly voice, he gave in and approached his son, sitting down right next to him as the bed creaked loudly.

"Another bad day?" he asked Cal.

He shrugged. Everything else about him seemed frozen, incapable of doing anything besides staring.

"Well, um, I don't know what you're going through but… well—hey, you know what the president said today?"

Cal looked up at him. "What?"

"I read it in the paper—well, my coworker did and told me about it. After the, um, you know, requesting of the anti-lynching bill from President Warren and the filibuster that came after that, you know what his response was?"

"What?"

"'Ladies and gentlemen, if lynching is what you genuinely want to be fighting for, then we might as well call our nation a torture factory. After the war, I'm surprised you boys want so much more of it so soon.'"

The boy next to Joshua softly smiled, perking up slightly. It wasn't the type of story most other kids would be encouraged over, but Cal liked it enough. There has never been any established record of Harding ever saying this in response to the federal anti-lynching bill, but some recordings have known to be lost in time. Cal continued his studies at school and his admiration for the twenty-ninth president, who passed away only a year later on a train due to some bad lobster. His death was immediate. His vice president, Calvin Coolidge, was sworn into office and reigned over the country until 1929.

The death came to Cal as quite a shock, losing another praised figure of his. But he moved on in time, realizing that this was something never to forget and never to hold him down. However, he never got the nerve to try lobster in his whole life, and never wrote letters containing information more private than wishing someone a happy birthday.

Cal broke this tradition with his last letter ever written in 1960, writing to Nan Britton nearly forty years after the final letter she had ever received from Harding. The content of the message has remained a mystery.

Next generation
Nia Cosby

Infestation

Kailyn Opperud

a sort of itching

Dee Smith

there was a sort of itching in my head
the kind that, hard's I tried, I could not quell
it crawled across the brows above my eyes
and walked the rope between my ears, as well

discomfort faded when it slipped away
I clutched my heaving chest in frank relief
wet dripped down my temples, tears and sweat
my tortured form shook like a trembling leaf

as troubling as the itching seemed to be
my idle mind yearns for its brief upset
the balmy quiet sitting in its stead
does not resolve the needs I do need met

I peer inside the cavern of my skull
turn over tables, chairs and old, dull books
pull up the torn-up rug and tug the shades
pry open crannies, poke around slim nooks

just as I draw myself out to give up
believing it had well and truly gone
a tickle starts up in my pinky finger
the itching slowly, surely comes to dawn

I beg it to remain right where it is
and run to grab some paper and a pen
to scratch it down exactly as I felt it
and capture what I'd come to know again

I write the word *again* for buoyant measure
stare at the thing the itching has become
it twists and kicks up grey dust on the page
and settles into a delightful, soothing hum